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ABSTRACT

Superintendents who come into conflict with their boards of education utilize a number of strategies with varying degrees of success. In this study, 77 Indiana school superintendents provided data on the strategies they use to resolve conflicts on their effectiveness. Superintendents indicated that "changing behavior" (communicating convincing evidence) was the most often used activity and proved highly effective. Used equally often and of equal effectiveness was "timing the approach," or delaying action until success seems more probable. Direct confrontation was the third most used strategy and was perceived to be moderately effective. Also moderately effective and fourth most often used was acquiescence. Fifth most used but rather ineffective was a bluffing display of high confidence. The sixth strategy in level of use and fifth in extent of effectiveness was soliciting support from others; although rarely used, this technique was found to be effective by those who used it. Finally, the least used and least effective strategy was to resign one's position. (Author/JM)

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Administrative Strategies Used and Their Effectiveness in Tension Situations

Norbert J. Nelson*

Superintendents develop organizational personalities. They are exhibited by particular administrative styles (self-systems) worked out over time. These styles or self-systems are behavioral patterns of anxiety reducing accommodations to board members with whom there are associations, relations, and interactions (Presthus). Superintendents are largely motivated by an inner need for organizational survival and "fit" (Giles). They seek to condition themselves to tension levels that provide them acceptable and tolerable behavioral limits.

In today's school systems, school boards and superintendents are increasingly exposed to conflicting situations, irrational demands, emotional reactions, vested interest forces, legal mandates, political pressures, resource scarcities and harsh criticisms. These conditions create social climates of uneasy suspense and strained relations. The result is tension at the top (mental, emotional and physical strains). The administrative task necessitates acting and coping in tension laden settings. The very role of chief executive and manager of school districts requires continuous strategic activity on the part of the Superintendent of Schools.

Strategy is the nature of activity employed to develop plans and bring them to successful resolution. It involves conducting and directing courses of action and basic movements of the system. Effective strategy lies in making proper choices at the most opportune time according to the conditions that prevail in a situation. In acting and coping, what strategies are superintendents using with what effectiveness?

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There are seven strategies that to a greater or lesser extent are being used by superintendents. Listed alphabetically, there are the strategies of (1) acquiescing and accepting, (2) changing behavior, (3) confronting directly, (4) displaying high confidence, (5) resigning position, (6) soliciting support, and (7) timing the approach. Singularly or in combination these strategies may be used and likely with varying degrees of effectiveness.

To ascertain to what extent these strategies are being used and with what degree of effectiveness, seventy-seven of a sample of 100 Indiana school superintendents provided data on their use of strategies and with what effectiveness. Figure 1 graphically summarizes the findings (Also see Table 1 in Appendix).

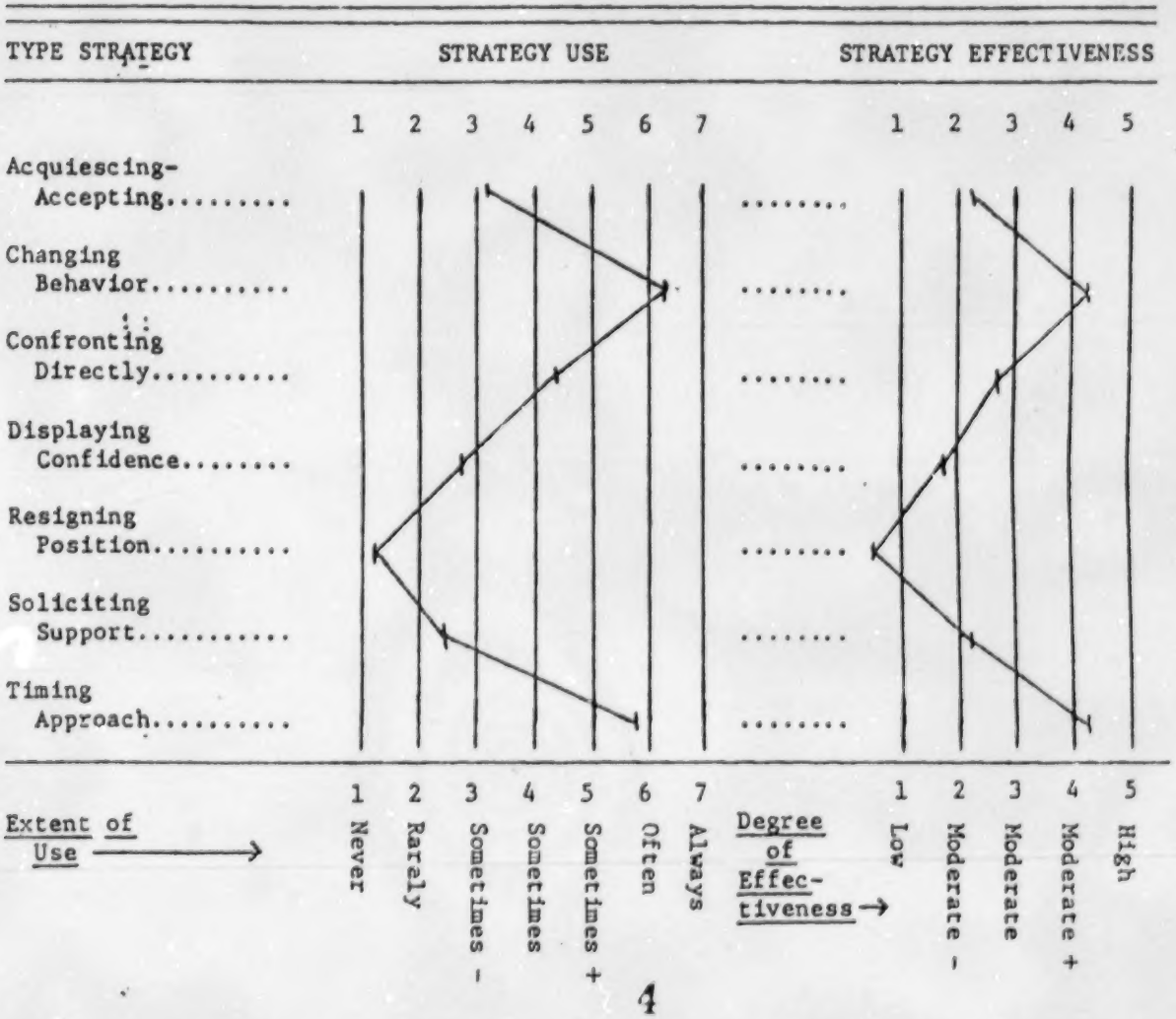

Figure 1. Superintendents' Perceptions of Use and Effectiveness

The two strategies used most often with the highest degree of effectiveness were changing behavior and timing the approach. As one might expect, superintendents indicated that directing effort to communicate convincing evidence which stresses need and positive results was a much used activity which proved to be highly effective. About equally used with high effectiveness was timing the approach. Delaying action until success probabilities are high was perceived as producing good results.

A third most used strategy that is perceived to be moderately effective is direct confrontation. This strategy gets an issue "on the table" with strong insistance that action be taken. There are times when issues can not be avoided or delayed and someone needs to press for their resolution. Apparently some superintendents find a direct, frontal attack effective in certain situations. Interestingly, a fourth most used strategy believed to be moderately effective was to acquiesce and accept what seems inevitable. Some superintendents find that it is in their and/or the school systems best interest to avoid confrontation and make do. They perhaps conclude a problem does not warrant continued effort or that doing anymore may be hopeless or even harmful.

A fifth strategy based on use by superintendents, although rarely, is the display of high confidence. There are those who do apparently find times when they need to exhibit a posture of assurance and strength when conditions may not truely warrant such posture. However, the strategy was not perceived as being too effective. The related strategy, number seven as the least used and with the least effectiveness, was to resign one's position. Superintendents for the most part did not use the threat to resign or to take another job as a strategy. The relatively few who did use this strategy did not find it to be effective.

The sixth strategy in extent of use and fifth in extent of effectiveness was soliciting support. Most superintendents in the sample indicated rare use

of a third party ally to exert influence. But those who did found it to be effective in helping to resolve problems.

The patterns of extent of use of various strategies and how effective they were found to be were not too surprising with the possible exception of the soliciting support strategy. It was thought that this strategy would be used a good deal in contemporary settings where tensions are present. When the data on this strategy were analyzed further, it was enlightening. Those superintendents who use the soliciting support strategy regularly found it to be highly effective. Ninety-five percent of the 18 superintendents who used the strategy regularly indicated it was very effective. In contrast, 96 percent of the 27 superintendents who indicated they did not use the strategy believed it would not be effective. Further probing of the data revealed some other interesting patterns. If superintendents, for example, perceived their school board to be fair or poor there was greater likelihood that the strategy was used more than where the boards were perceived as being good or excellent. It was more likely, too, that superintendents in large school systems in urban areas with bigger central office staffs would solicit outside support as a strategy more than superintendents in small schools in rural areas with small central office staffs. Of course, the cause-effect of the differences are not known from analyses of these data.

In summary, to the extent the analyzed strategy information is generalizable, the efforts to educate and communicate with school boards should be generously used as an administrative strategy -- it is effective. Of course timing, too, is very important as a strategy. This requires relevant and updated knowledge of the many variables that are at work. Knowing the pulse of the environment at all times is essential. Striking at the correct time leads to good results. There are times where superintendents need to step up front

and press forward on an issue. Hopefully this is not the usual modus operandi. Then, too, in conflict situations you can not win them all. So a good strategy to use in some instances is to acquiesce and accept. There may be occasions, hopefully rare, where you use the bluff or threat as strategies. These strategies were not used very much by superintendents in our sample and they were not thought to be effective. Although soliciting support from others was not widely used as a strategy by superintendents in our sample, those who did use it found it to be very effective. In my judgment, tension situations should motivate one to develop effective coalitions of influence -- thus soliciting allies is basically a viable strategy.

The AASA January issue of "The School Administrator" (Vol. 37, No. 1, January, 1980) summarized a study that attempts to explain superintendents' failure. It is recommended that they need business management skills. In this same issue George Gallup was quoted as stating that school administrators should assume roles of intellectual leaders in the community. He suggested that this would raise people's confidence in the schools. I find no fault in superintendents being both "intellectual leaders" and "business geniuses." But I do know whatever the superintendents' organizational personality, it requires exercise of strategy. Executive leadership is the province of strategy. It is the effective strategist who is needed to develop and maintain dynamic equilibrium in our school systems. Systems that successfully cope with tensions. Systems that reflect efficient business operations. Systems in which there is confidence that intellectual goals are being successfully pursued.

Table 1. The Extent of Use and Effectiveness of Seven Strategies as Indicated by a Sample of 77 Indiana School Superintendents Showing Averages, Ranks, and Percentages, Spring, 1980

	Use		Extent of Use		Effectiveness		Extent of Effectiveness		
	Mean*	Rank	often-Regularly	Rarely-never	Mean**	Rank	High	Moderate	Low
Acquiescing and accepting... Recognize helplessness. Submit to inevitable. Give-in and avoid confrontations.	3.14	4	22%	78%	2.53	4	20%	40%	40%
Changing behavior..... Provide convincing evidence. Improve communication. Stress need and positive results.	6.34	1	99	1	4.21	1	68%	27%	5
Confronting directly..... Face the issue. Attack frontally. Get issue "on the table." Insist on action.	4.39	3	63	37	2.86	3	22	56	22
Displaying confidence..... Boldly present. Feign strength. Bolster position. Exhibit feeling of confidence.	2.83	5	28	72	1.82	6	13	31	56
Resigning position..... Threaten to resign. Formally tender resignation. Suggest you may move.	1.09	7	1	99	0.49	7	4	3	93
Soliciting support..... Use third party ally to help. Use others to influence. Bring pressure to bear from other sources.	2.69	6	24	76	2.03	5	21	27	52
Timing Approach..... Delay action until conditions favorable. Move when odds are best. Exploit advantages of particular time.	5.87	2	93	7	4.17	2	70	22	8

*Maximum use would be 7.
**Maximum effectiveness would be 5.